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The FrontLine Supervisor  
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Q. I am having problems getting along with my employee. We clash when I ask him to perform tasks, provide information, or discuss work matters. Should he and I meet with the EAP to mediate our ongoing conflict?

A. The problems you face supervising your employee make mediation sound attractive, but this could do more harm than good or produce only short-term results. Your conflict is not the same as two coworkers struggling to maintain a positive working relationship. Instead, your conflict arises from your employee=s insubordination and refusal to work. You should consult with the EA professional to examine your communication style or other issues that may interfere with your ability to supervise this employee. Also examine what keeps you from employing disciplinary tools to manage this employee successfully. Do you fear the reaction of your employee if you take disciplinary action? Without examining your supervisory practices, including your willingness to be assertive, mediation could send a message to your employee that change is optional.

Q. When I confront my employee about her performance problems, she raises many complaints about her coworkers, the organization, and me. A couple of her complaints are legitimate, but how do I get past her evasion of the issues?

A. Your employee=s focus on her own complaints is distracting you and making you feel reluctant to insist on the changes you want. Although you could assert yourself and ignore her complaints, such an approach would increase her resentment and probably contribute to larger problems. A better approach is to have her prepare a memo for you with a list of her concerns so that the merit of each can be considered along with the solutions. Follow this up with a corrective memo asking for the changes you want and when you expect them. Include a follow-up plan. Propose and implement solutions to each of her complaints and, if necessary, explain why certain complaints have no solutions or are not valid. Clearly state that you can no longer accept any of the items in her memo as the basis for not making the performance changes you require of her.

Q. I am a new supervisor of a work group that has many long-term personnel problems. How do I change things but at the same time not alienate employees within the work group who see me as new to the work culture, its services, and unique problems?

A. A new supervisor typically faces resistance from employees when he or she suggests changes to solve long-term personnel problems. Overestimating how quickly changes can be made is a common mistake for new, enthusiastic supervisors. Complaints are usually the first signal of alienation among those supervised. Unfortunately, being a new supervisor is a disadvantage when management hears complaints from employees who have reputations as good performers, regardless of the validity of those complaints. A key to success is building a trusting relationship with your supervisor. A strong message of support from your supervisor that establishes your legitimate authority can also be helpful. Nothing, however, works better than spending ample time learning about your employees, their needs, and the work environment. Unless directed otherwise, gain approval for changes you wish to pursue. Changes should be consistent with your supervisor=s priorities. Just as important, strategies for change should carry your supervisor=s approval.

Q. Our office provides front-line customer service, and quite frankly, it=s tough. Many customers are rude and offensive, and I believe it affects morale. Can the EAP help?

A. Ask your EA professional staff about services available to assist the work unit. Employees range in their abilities to cope with customers who may be mildly irritated or even potentially dangerous. Undesirable employee responses to offensive customers may indicate that more effective team-building and stress management techniques are indicated. Often overlooked, the most effective stress management is employee team meetings to share experiences and give each other support. Undesirable responses by employees who feel threatened by customers should first be viewed as potentially abnormal responses to abnormal stress@ rather than the other way around. Preventing such responses should initially focus what support employees need to be more effective, rather than jumping to take corrective action, which labels the employee as the problem. Use of the EAP by employees affected by offensive customers is always appropriate.

Q. When I reminded my employee about our past discussions concerning his conduct problems, he denied such discussions had occurred. Would documentation prevent this

type of denial or lying?

A. Although your employee may be lying about his recollection of the discussions you held with him concerning his conduct problems, it is also conceivable that your employee doesn't remember them. Denying previous discussions with the supervisor about performance problems is not uncommon among troubled employees. Such denials can be caused by distortions in thinking that are produced by defensiveness to avoid personal responsibility for the behavior. Examples of defensive thinking include minimizing the seriousness of problematic behavior, and blaming the behavior on someone or something else. These two thinking patterns are different from willful denial or lying. In a real sense, they allow the employee to reinterpret what happened to fit his beliefs. A memo to document a corrective discussion held with the employee can help prevent this problem.